The Electric Philosopher

Irresponsible Pseudophilosophy

Saturday, 26 December 2015

Chasm by Nick Land: Review

Chasm is Nick Land's latest offering to the world of (e-)letters, and it's certainly a welcome addition to my Kindle library. Although, it's very, very odd (but then again, if you know the first thing about Land you knew to expect, and, indeed, *welcome* that).

The writing is a lot tighter than in *Phyl-Undhu*, his previous work of fiction, released last year. His focus is much sharper, the narrative strays less (don't get me wrong, as I've already attested to, *Phyl-Undhu* is brilliant), and yet it's much more difficult to say what the hell *Chasm* is about. *P-U* remained in conceptual territory I have a fairly good familiarity with (The Great Filter, Fermi, the simulation hypothesis), while everything here is much more *abstract*, which is entirely the point: it contains an appendix called 'Manifesto for an Abstract Literature' after all. Land's inner maths (Qabalah) nerd was obviously having a lot of fun here, and my comparative numerical illiteracy blunted my enjoyment a little.

The story follows five men in a boat ('Oh, is he doing *Heart of Darkness*?' I asked myself early on. Well, *sort of*.), sent out into the Pacific by the mysterious QASM corporation to dispose of *something* by dropping it into the Mariana Trench. The object in question is described as more of an absence than a presence, a block of unrelfective material which presumably contains *something*. This is pure MacGuffin of course, which Land more-or-less explicitly admits, but by Cthulhu it's creepy all the same. As the journey continues, the crew enter into a state of total insomnia...and yet, the lack of sleep doesn't keep them from dreaming...

This is pure Nick Land. There's much Lovecraft in the crew's decaying sanity, and the horror from the sea vibe, with delicious passages discussing the life that lives around deep-sea volcanic vents so far, far down that the sun's rays never reach down to them except in the form of the faintest of particle rays; the preoccupation with numbers; broken causality and linearity; suggestions of an alignment between corporate and 'deep state' interests. Like *Phyl-Undhu*, there's some interesting stuff in the appendices, which I don't think I've ever seen on Xenosystems so it may very well be unique to this publication. And again like *Phyl-Undhu*, this feels a lot like a puzzle that Land is expecting us to try and solve, though, for reasons that will become obvious when you read it, I'm not sure how willing I am to let this stuff too far into my head.

In terms of sheer construction, *Chasm* is better than *Phyl-Undhu*, though I must confess I enjoyed the latter slightly more. It gives you a taste of the wider world of its setting, without giving you too much to chew on, leaving you wanting more, which is always a good move for speculative fiction. I think *Chasm* is best approached as an experiment, rather than just the cleverer kind of weird story. It's an experiment in constructing a literature composed of hints and suggestions at the abstract, perhaps even the thing-in-itself, rather than giving us anything definite.

To quote the appendix:

> Abstract literature writes in *clues*, with clue words, but without hope. It is the detective fiction of the insoluble crime, the science fiction of an inconceivable future, the mystery fiction of the impregnable unknown, proceeding through cryptic names of evocation, and rigid designators without significance. The *weirdness* it explores does not pass, unless to withdraw more completely into itself. There is no answer, or even - for long- the place for an answer. Where the solution might have been found waits something else. Description is damage.

The best monster is one you never see. Everyone knows that. The only disappointing moment in *Alien* is when you actually *see* the bloody thing at the end. A perfect horror story would be one where you never see anything, or hear anything, or even really know anything. It's one where you

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detect hints, notice clues, but can never quite correlate all of the knowledge in your mind together sufficiently to guess at the shape of the monster. That is what Land is doing, and he does it well.

There's not much more I can say, which is due to the nature of the beast in question, so I'll leave you here.

Posted by Unknown at 21:26

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